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NOVEL BACTERIAL HEMOGLOBIN RECEPTOR GENES AND USES

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5 This invention was made with government support under National Institute of Health grants R01 AI32493 and R01 AI22933. The government has certain rights to this invention.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

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1. Field of the Invention

This invention relates to hemoglobin receptor genes and the proteins encoded therefrom of certain bacterial species, particularly species of *Neisseria* bacteria. More particularly, this invention relates to hemoglobin receptor genes, polypeptides and peptides useful for preparing vaccines and antibodies against *Neisseria*, and methods and means for producing such peptides and polypeptides *in vitro*. Also provided are diagnostic and therapeutic methods and reagents useful in detecting and treating *Neisseria* infection and methods for developing novel and effective anti-*Neisseria* agents.

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20. Background of the Invention

The *Neisseriae* comprise a genus of bacteria that includes two gram-negative species of pyogenic cocci pathogenic for humans: *Neisseria meningitidis* and *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*. *N. meningitidis* is a major cause of bacterial meningitis in humans, especially children. The disease characteristically proceeds from asymptomatic carriage of the bacterium in the nasopharynx to invasion of the bloodstream and cerebrospinal fluid in susceptible individuals.

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Neisseria meningitidis is one of the leading causes of bacterial meningitis in children and healthy adults in the world. The severity of the disease is evidenced by the ability of meningococci to cause the death of previously healthy individuals in less than 24 hours. *N. meningitidis* has a polysaccharide capsule whose diversity of component antigenic polysaccharide molecules has resulted in the classification of ten different serogroups. Of these, group A strains are the classic epidemic strains; group B and C are generally endemic strains, but C occasionally causes an epidemic outbreak. All known group A strains have the same protein antigens on their

outer membranes, while group B strains have a dozen serotypes or groupings based on the presence of principal outer membrane protein antigens (as opposed to polysaccharides).

Survival of a pathogen such as *N. meningitidis* in a host depends on its ability to overcome a battery of host defense mechanisms. One nonspecific host defense mechanism against microbial intruders is to limit the availability of iron in tissues (Weinberg, 1984, *Physiological. Rev.* 64: 65-102), because iron is a necessary nutrient for most microbial pathogens. The vast majority of iron in the human adult is located intracellularly in the form of hemoglobin (76%) or ferritin (23%). The remainder can be found extracellularly bound to host iron-binding proteins such as transferrin and lactoferrin (Otto *et al.*, 1992, *Crit. Rev. Microbiol.* 18: 217-233).

Pathogenic bacteria have adapted to this iron-limiting environment by developing highly specific and effective iron assimilation systems. A large number of these bacteria secrete siderophores, small, non-protein iron chelators which, due to their extremely high affinity for iron (III), scavenge trace amounts of iron(III) from the environment and shuttle the iron back to the bacterial cell (Baggs and Neilands, 1987, *Microbiol. Rev.* 51: 509-518; Braun and Hantke, 1991, in Winkelmann (ed.), *Handbook of Microbial Iron Chelates*, CRC Press: Boca Raton, Fla., pp. 107-138.).

Alternatively, some bacterial pathogens, like *Neisseriae* species (Archibald and DeVoe, 1979, *FEMS Microbiol. Lett.* 6: 159-162; Mickelson *et al.*, 1982, *Infect. Immun.* 35: 915-920; Dyer *et al.*, 1987, *Infect. Immun.* 55: 2171-2175), *Haemophilus influenzae* (Coulton and Pang, 1983, *Curr. Microbiol.* 9: 93-98; Schryvers, 1988, *Mol. Microbiol.* 2: 467-472; Jarosik *et al.*, 1994, *Infect. Immun.* 62: 2470-2477), *Vibrio cholerae* (Stoebner and Payne, 1988, *Infect. Immun.* 56: 2891-2895; Henderson and Payne, 1994, *J. Bacteriol.* 176: 3269-3277), *Yersiniae* (Stojiljkovic and Hantke, 1992, *EMBO J.* 11: 4359-4367) and *Actinobacillus pleuropneumoniae* (Gerlach *et al.*, 1992, *Infect. Immun.* 60: 3253-3261) have evolved more sophisticated mechanisms to sequester iron from the host. These pathogens can directly bind host's iron-binding proteins such as lactoferrin, transferrin, and heme-containing compounds, and use them as sole sources of iron.

The importance of iron in the virulence of *N. meningitidis* was demonstrated by *in vivo* studies using mice as the animal model system (Calver *et al.*, 1976, *Can. J. Microbiol.* 22: 832-838; Holbien *et al.*, 1981, *Infect. Immun.* 34: 120-125). Specific iron-regulated outer membrane receptors have been shown to be involved in the binding and the utilization of lactoferrin- and transferrin-iron in *Neisseriae* (Schryvers and Morris, 1988, *Infect. Immun.* 56: 1144-1149 and 5 *Mol. Microbiol.* 2: 281-288; Legrain *et al.*, 1993, *Gene* 130: 81-90; Pettersson *et al.*, 1993, *Infect. Immun.* 61: 4724-4733 and 1994, *J. Bacteriol.* 176: 1764-1766). These receptors share significant amino acid similarity and, most probably, also the mechanism of iron internalization, with receptors for siderophores and vitamin B12 of other Gram-negative bacteria (Cornelissen 10 *et al.*, 1993, *J. Bacteriol.* 174: 5788-5797). In contrast, the mechanism by which *Neisseriae* utilize hemoglobin- and hemin-iron as well as the components involved have so far not been described.

Recently, several proteins with hemoglobin-binding and/or hemin-binding activities have been identified in total membranes of iron-limited *N. meningitidis* and *N. gonorrhoeae*.

Lee and Hill, 1992, *J. gen. Microbiol.* 138: 2647-2656 disclose the specific hemoglobin binding by isolated outer membranes of *N. meningitidis*.

Martek and Lee, 1994, *Infect. Immun.* 62: 700-703 disclosed that acquisition of heme iron by *N. meningitidis* does not involve meningococcal transferrin-binding proteins.

Lee, 1994, *Microbiol.* 140: 1473-1480 describes the biochemical isolation and characterization of hemin binding proteins from *N. meningitidis*.

The precise role of these proteins in hemin and/or hemoglobin utilization remains unclear at present, although these proteins are likely to be components of a hemin-utilization system in *N. meningitidis*.

The dependence on host iron stores for *Neisseria* growth is a potentially useful route towards the development of novel and effective therapeutic intervention strategies. Historically, infections of both *N. meningitidis* and *N. gonorrhoeae* were treated chemoprophylactically with sulfonamide drugs. However, with the development of sulfonamide-resistant strains came the necessity of using alternative modes of therapy such as antibiotic treatment. More recently, the drug treatment of choice includes the administration of high grade penicillin. However, the

success of antimicrobial treatment is decreased if therapy is not initiated early after infection.

5 Gonococcal infection has also been treated with penicillin, ampicillin, or amoxicillin, tetracycline hydrochloride, and spectinomycin. Unfortunately, because the incidence of infections due to penicillinase-producing bacteria has increased, several new, more expensive β -lactam antibiotics have been used in treatment. Despite the fact that existing antibiotics have decreased the serious consequences of gonorrhea, their use has not lowered the incidence of the infection in the general population.

10 Prevention of meningococcal disease has been attempted by chemoprophylaxis and immunoprophylaxis. At present, rifampin and minocycline are used, but only for humans in close contact with an infected person as this treatment has a number of disadvantages. The only commercially available vaccine against meningococcal meningitis has as its major component the bacterial polysaccharide capsule. In adults this vaccine protects against serogroups A, C, Y and W135. It is not effective against serogroup B, and is ineffective in children against serogroup C. Thus far, immunoprophylactic preventive treatment has not been available for *N. gonorrhoeae*.

15 Thus, what is needed are better preventative therapies for meningococcal meningitis and gonorrhea including more effective, longer lasting vaccines which protect across all of the serogroups of *N. meningitidis* and all the serotypes of *N. gonorrhoeae*. In addition, better methods are needed to treat meningococcal and gonococcal infection.

20 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

25 The present invention relates to the cloning, expression and functional characterization of genes encoding bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins. Specifically, the invention relates to genes encoding hemoglobin receptor proteins from *Neisseria* species, in particular *Neisseria meningitidis* and *N. gonorrhoeae*. The invention comprises species of nucleic acids having a nucleotide sequence encoding novel bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins. Also provided by this invention is the deduced amino acid sequence of the cognate hemoglobin receptor proteins of these bacterial genes.

The invention provides nucleic acids, nucleic acid hybridization probes, recombinant expression constructs capable of expressing the hemoglobin receptor protein of the invention in cultures of transformed cells, preferably bacterial cells, and such cultures of transformed bacterial cells that express the hemoglobin receptor proteins of the invention. The invention also provides gene knockout vectors for inactivating the hemoglobin receptor protein gene in cells, particularly cells of *Neisseria* species, *via*, for example, homologous recombination and other mechanisms, and cultures of such hemoglobin receptor protein null mutant cells.

The invention also provides homogeneous preparations of the bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins of the invention, as well as antibodies against and epitopes of the hemoglobin receptor protein. Methods for characterizing this receptor protein and methods for using the protein in the development of agents having pharmacological uses related to this receptor, particularly bactericidal and bacteriostatic uses, are also provided by the invention.

In other embodiments of this invention are provided diagnostic methods and reagents encompassing the use of the anti-*Neisseria* hemoglobin receptor protein antibodies of the invention. Still further embodiments provided herein include therapeutic methods and reagents encompassing the use of the anti-*Neisseria* hemoglobin receptor protein antibodies of the invention. Even more embodiments include diagnostic methods and reagents encompassing the use of the *Neisseria* hemoglobin receptor protein-encoding nucleic acids of the invention, as sensitive probes for the presence of *Neisseria* infection using nucleic acid hybridization techniques and/or *in vitro* amplification methodologies. Yet additional embodiments of the invention include therapeutic methods and reagents encompassing the use of the *Neisseria* hemoglobin receptor protein-encoding nucleic acids of the invention, comprising recombinant expression constructs engineered to produce antisense transcripts of the *Neisseria* hemoglobin receptor gene and fragments thereof, as well as recombinant knockout vectors of the invention. The invention also provides the *Neisseria* hemoglobin receptor protein and epitopes thereof as components of vaccines for the development of non-disease associated immunity to pathological infection with bacteria of *Neisseria* species.

In a first aspect, the invention provides a nucleic acid having a nucleotide sequence encoding a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein gene. In a preferred embodiment, the bacterial

hemoglobin receptor protein gene is isolated from bacteria of *Neisseria* species. In a particularly preferred embodiment, the hemoglobin receptor protein gene is isolated from *Neisseria meningitidis*, serotype C. In a particular example of this embodiment, the nucleic acid comprises a 3.3 kilobase (kb) *Bam*HI/*Hind*III fragment of *N. meningitidis* genomic DNA. In 5 this embodiment, the nucleotide sequence comprises an open reading frame of 2376 nucleotides of *N. meningitidis* genomic DNA encoding 792 amino acids comprising the hemoglobin receptor gene. In this embodiment of the invention, the nucleotide sequence of the *N. meningitidis* hemoglobin receptor gene is the sequence depicted in *Figure 2* (SEQ ID No:1). It will be understood that the *N. meningitidis* gene as disclosed herein is defined, insofar as is necessary, 10 by the amino acid sequence of the protein encoded therein, said amino acid sequence being represented in *Figure 2* (SEQ. ID No.:2). Thus, it will be understood that the particular nucleotide sequence depicted in *Figure 2* (SEQ. ID. No.:1) is but one of a number of equivalent 15 nucleotide sequences that encode the hemoglobin receptor protein, due to the degeneracy of the genetic code, and that all such alternative, equivalent nucleotide sequences are hereby explicitly encompassed within the disclosed nucleotide sequences of the invention. Also included herein are any mutant or allelic variations of this nucleotide sequence, either naturally occurring or the product of *in vitro* chemical or genetic modification. Each such variant will be understood to have essentially the same nucleotide sequence as the nucleotide sequence of the corresponding *N. meningitidis* hemoglobin receptor protein disclosed herein.

20 In another particularly preferred embodiment of this aspect of the invention, the hemoglobin receptor protein gene is isolated from *Neisseria meningitidis*, serotype A. In a particular example of this embodiment, the nucleic acid comprises a 2373 basepair (bp) polymerase chain reaction-amplified fragment of *N. meningitidis*, serotype A genomic DNA. In this embodiment, the nucleotide sequence comprises an open reading frame of 2373 25 nucleotides of *N. meningitidis* genomic DNA encoding 790 amino acids comprising the hemoglobin receptor gene. In this embodiment of the invention, the nucleotide sequence of the *N. meningitidis* hemoglobin receptor gene is the sequence depicted in *Figure 7* (SEQ ID No:3). It will be understood that the *N. meningitidis* gene as disclosed herein is defined, insofar as is necessary, by the amino acid sequence of the protein encoded therein, said amino acid sequence

Figure 7A-7I
a being represented in *Figure 7* (SEQ. ID No.:4). Thus, it will be understood that the particular
a nucleotide sequence depicted in *Figure 7* (SEQ. ID. No.:3) is but one of a number of equivalent
nucleotide sequences that encode the hemoglobin receptor protein, due to the degeneracy of the
genetic code, and that all such alternative, equivalent nucleotide sequences are hereby explicitly
5 encompassed within the disclosed nucleotide sequences of the invention. Also included herein
are any mutant or allelic variations of this nucleotide sequence, either naturally occurring or the
product of *in vitro* chemical or genetic modification. Each such variant will be understood to
have essentially the same nucleotide sequence as the nucleotide sequence of the corresponding
N. meningitidis hemoglobin receptor protein disclosed herein.

10 In another particularly preferred embodiment of this aspect of the invention, the
hemoglobin receptor protein gene is isolated from *Neisseria meningitidis*, serotype B. In a
particular example of this embodiment, the nucleic acid comprises a 2376 basepair (bp)
polymerase chain reaction-amplified fragment of *N. meningitidis*, serotype A genomic DNA.
In this embodiment, the nucleotide sequence comprises an open reading frame of 2373
15 nucleotides of *N. meningitidis* genomic DNA encoding 791 amino acids comprising the
hemoglobin receptor gene. In this embodiment of the invention, the nucleotide sequence of the
a *N. meningitidis* hemoglobin receptor gene is the sequence depicted in *Figure 8* (SEQ ID No:5).
It will be understood that the *N. meningitidis* gene as disclosed herein is defined, insofar as is
necessary, by the amino acid sequence of the protein encoded therein, said amino acid sequence
20 a being represented in *Figure 8* (SEQ. ID No.:6). Thus, it will be understood that the particular
a nucleotide sequence depicted in *Figure 8* (SEQ. ID. No.:5) is but one of a number of equivalent
nucleotide sequences that encode the hemoglobin receptor protein, due to the degeneracy of the
genetic code, and that all such alternative, equivalent nucleotide sequences are hereby explicitly
encompassed within the disclosed nucleotide sequences of the invention. Also included herein
25 are any mutant or allelic variations of this nucleotide sequence, either naturally occurring or the
product of *in vitro* chemical or genetic modification. Each such variant will be understood to
have essentially the same nucleotide sequence as the nucleotide sequence of the corresponding
N. meningitidis hemoglobin receptor protein disclosed herein.

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In yet other preferred embodiments, the invention provides nucleic acid encoding a hemoglobin receptor protein gene isolated from *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*. In a particular example of this embodiment, the nucleic acid comprises a 2378 basepair (bp) polymerase chain reaction-amplified fragment of *N. gonorrhoeae* genomic DNA. In this embodiment, the nucleotide sequence comprises an open reading frame of 2373 nucleotides of *N. gonorrhoeae* genomic DNA encoding 791 amino acids comprising the hemoglobin receptor gene. In this embodiment of the invention, the nucleotide sequence of the *N. gonorrhoeae* hemoglobin receptor gene is the sequence depicted in *Figure 9A-9T* (SEQ ID No:7). It will be understood that the *N. gonorrhoeae* gene as disclosed herein is defined, insofar as is necessary, by the amino acid sequence of the protein encoded therein, said amino acid sequence being represented in *Figure 9A-9T* (SEQ. ID No.:8). Thus, it will be understood that the particular nucleotide sequence depicted in *Figure 9A-9T* (SEQ. ID. No.:7) is but one of a number of equivalent nucleotide sequences that encode the hemoglobin receptor protein, due to the degeneracy of the genetic code, and that all such alternative, equivalent nucleotide sequences are hereby explicitly encompassed within the disclosed nucleotide sequences of the invention. Also included herein are any mutant or allelic variations of this nucleotide sequence, either naturally occurring or the product of *in vitro* chemical or genetic modification. Each such variant will be understood to have essentially the same nucleotide sequence as the nucleotide sequence of the corresponding *N. gonorrhoeae* hemoglobin receptor protein disclosed herein.

The invention also provides bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins. In a preferred embodiment, the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein is isolated from bacteria of *Neisseria* species. In a particularly preferred embodiment, the hemoglobin receptor protein is isolated from *Neisseria meningitidis*. In a particular example of this embodiment, the protein is derived from *N. meningitidis*, serotype C and comprises an amino acid sequence of 792 amino acids.

25 In this embodiment of the invention, the amino acid sequence of the *N. meningitidis*, serotype C hemoglobin receptor protein is the sequence depicted in *Figure 2A-2T* (SEQ ID No:2).

26 In another example of this embodiment, the protein is derived from *N. meningitidis*, serotype A and comprises an amino acid sequence of 790 amino acids. In this embodiment of the invention, the amino acid sequence of the *N. meningitidis*, serotype A hemoglobin receptor

Figure 7A-7I

1 A protein is the sequence depicted in Figure 7 (SEQ ID No:4). In yet another example of this embodiment, the protein is derived from *N. meningitidis*, serotype B and comprises an amino acid sequence of 791 amino acids. In this embodiment of the invention, the amino acid sequence of the *N. meningitidis*, serotype B hemoglobin receptor protein is the sequence depicted in Figure 8 (SEQ ID No:6). The invention also provides hemoglobin receptor protein derived from *N. gonorrhoeae*. In this embodiment of the invention, the protein comprises an amino acid sequence of 791 amino acids, and the amino acid sequence of the *N. gonorrhoeae* hemoglobin receptor protein is the sequence depicted in Figure 9 (SEQ ID No:8). Also explicitly encompassed within the scope of this invention are related bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins, particularly such proteins isolated from *Neisseria* species, having essentially the same amino acid sequence and substantially the same biological properties as the hemoglobin receptor protein encoded by the *N. meningitidis* and *N. gonorrhoeae* nucleotide sequences described herein.

10 In another aspect, the invention provides a homogeneous preparation of an approximately 85.5 kiloDalton (kD) bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein or derivative thereof, said size being understood to be the size of the protein before any post-translational modifications thereof. Also provided is a 90kD embodiment of the receptor as determined by sodium dodecyl sulfate/polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis under reducing conditions. In a preferred embodiment, the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein is isolated from bacteria of *Neisseria* species. In a particularly preferred embodiment, the hemoglobin receptor protein is isolated from *N. meningitidis*. In one embodiment of this aspect of the invention, the protein is isolated from *N. meningitidis*, serotype C and the amino acid sequence of the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein or derivative thereof preferably is the amino acid sequence of the hemoglobin receptor protein shown in Figure 2 (SEQ ID No:2). In a second embodiment of this aspect of the invention, the protein is isolated from *N. meningitidis*, serotype A and the amino acid sequence of the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein or derivative thereof preferably is the amino acid sequence of the hemoglobin receptor protein shown in Figure 7 (SEQ ID No:4). In a third embodiment of this aspect of the invention, the protein is isolated from *N. meningitidis*, serotype B and the amino acid sequence of the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein or derivative thereof

6 α preferably is the amino acid sequence of the hemoglobin receptor protein shown in ^{Figure 8A-8I} (SEQ ID No:6). The invention also provides a homogeneous preparation of a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from *N. gonorrhoeae*. In a preferred embodiment, the amino acid sequence of the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein or derivative thereof preferably
5 α is the amino acid sequence of the hemoglobin receptor protein shown in ^{Figure 9A-9I} (SEQ ID No:8).

10 This invention provides nucleotide probes derived from the nucleotide sequences herein provided. The invention includes probes isolated from either complementary DNA (cDNA) copies of bacterial messenger RNA (mRNA) or bacterial genomic DNA (gDNA), as well as probes made synthetically or by *in vitro* amplification methods using the sequence information provided herein. The invention specifically includes but is not limited to oligonucleotide, nick-translated, random primed, or *in vitro* amplified probes made using cDNA or genomic clones embodying the invention, and oligonucleotide and other synthetic probes synthesized chemically using the nucleotide sequence information of cDNA or genomic clone embodiments of the invention.

15 It is a further object of this invention to provide such nucleic acid hybridization probes to detect the presence of bacteria of *Neisseria* species, particularly *N. meningitidis* and *N. gonorrhoeae*, in a biological sample in the diagnosis of a *Neisseria* infection in a human. Such a biological sample preferably includes blood, urine, semen, mucus, cerebrospinal fluid, peritoneal fluid and ascites fluids, as well as cell scrapings from the epithelium of the mouth, urethra, anus and rectum, and other organs.

20 The present invention also includes peptides encoded by the nucleotide sequences comprising the nucleic acid embodiments of the invention. The invention includes either naturally occurring or synthetic peptides which may be used as antigens for the production of
25 hemoglobin receptor protein-specific antibodies. The invention also comprises such antibodies, preferably monoclonal antibodies, and cells and cultures of cells producing such antibodies.

Thus, the invention also provides antibodies against and epitopes of bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins of the invention. It is an object of the present invention to provide antibodies that are immunologically reactive to the bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins of the invention.

It is a particular object to provide monoclonal antibodies against these bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins. In a preferred embodiment, antibodies provided are raised against bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from bacteria of *Neisseria* species. In a particularly preferred embodiment, such antibodies are specific for the hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from *Neisseria meningitidis* serotypes A, B or C. In additional particularly preferred embodiment, such antibodies are specific for the hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*.

Hybridoma cell lines producing such antibodies are also objects of the invention. It is envisioned ^{that} such hybridoma cell lines may be produced as the result of fusion between a non-immunoglobulin producing mouse myeloma cell line and spleen cells derived from a mouse immunized with purified hemoglobin receptor protein or a cell expressing antigens or epitopes of bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins of the invention. The present invention also provides hybridoma cell lines that produce such antibodies, and can be injected into a living mouse to provide an ascites fluid from the mouse that is comprised of such antibodies. In a preferred embodiment, antibodies provided are raised against bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from bacteria of *Neisseria* species. In a particularly preferred embodiment, such antibodies are specific for the hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from *Neisseria meningitidis*, serotypes A, B or C. In additional particularly preferred embodiment, such antibodies are specific for the hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*.

It is a further object of the invention to provide immunologically-active epitopes of the bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins of the invention. Chimeric antibodies immunologically reactive against the bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins of the invention are also within the scope of this invention. In a preferred embodiment, antibodies and epitopes provided are raised against or derived from bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from bacteria of *Neisseria* species. In a particularly preferred embodiment, such antibodies and epitopes are specific for the hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from *Neisseria meningitidis*, serotypes A, B or C. In additional particularly preferred embodiment, such antibodies and epitopes are specific for the hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*.

The present invention provides recombinant expression constructs comprising a nucleic acid encoding a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein wherein the construct is capable of expressing the encoded hemoglobin receptor protein in cultures of cells transformed with the construct. Preferred embodiments of such constructs comprise the *N. meningitidis*, serotype C hemoglobin receptor gene depicted in *Figure 2* (SEQ ID No.:1), such constructs being capable of expressing the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein encoded therein in cells transformed with the construct. Additional preferred embodiments of such constructs comprise the *N. meningitidis*, serotype A hemoglobin receptor gene depicted in *Figure 7* (SEQ ID No.:3), such constructs being capable of expressing the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein encoded therein in cells transformed with the construct. Further additional preferred embodiments of such constructs comprise the *N. meningitidis*, serotype B hemoglobin receptor gene depicted in *Figure 8* (SEQ ID No.:5), such constructs being capable of expressing the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein encoded therein in cells transformed with the construct. The invention also provides recombinant expression constructs encoding a hemoglobin receptor protein gene isolated from *ZN. gonorrhoeae*. In a particularly preferred embodiment, such constructs comprise the *N. gonorrhoeae* hemoglobin receptor gene depicted in *Figure 9* (SEQ ID No.:7), the constructs being capable of expressing the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein encoded therein in cells transformed with the construct.

The invention also provides cultures of cells, preferably bacterial cells, having been transformed with the recombinant expression constructs of the invention, each such culture being capable of and in fact expressing the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein encoded in the transforming construct.

The present invention also includes within its scope protein preparations of prokaryotic cell membranes containing the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein of the invention, derived from cultures of prokaryotic cells transformed with the recombinant expression constructs of the invention.

The invention also provides diagnostic reagents and methods for using such reagents for detecting the existence of an infection in a human, with bacteria of a *Neisseria* species. In preferred embodiments, such diagnostic reagents comprise antibodies that are immunologically

reactive with a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein. In a preferred embodiment, such antibodies are raised against a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from bacteria of *Neisseria* species. In a particularly preferred embodiment, such antibodies are specific for the hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from *Neisseria meningitidis*, serotypes A, B or C. In additional particularly preferred embodiments, such antibodies are specific for the hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*.

In yet another embodiment of this aspect of the invention are provided diagnostic reagents and methods for using such reagents wherein said reagents are nucleic acid hybridization probes comprising a bacterial hemoglobin receptor gene. In a preferred embodiment, the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein gene is isolated from bacteria of *Neisseria* species. In a particularly preferred embodiment, the hemoglobin receptor protein gene is isolated from *Neisseria meningitidis*. In particular examples of this embodiment of the invention, the nucleic acid probes comprise a specifically-hybridizing fragment of a 3.3 kilobase (kb) *Bam*HI/*Hind*III fragment of *N. meningitidis*, serotype C genomic DNA. In this embodiment, the nucleotide sequence comprises all or a specifically-hybridizing fragment of an open reading frame of 2376 nucleotides of *N. meningitidis*, serotype C genomic DNA encoding 792 amino acids comprising the hemoglobin receptor gene. In this embodiment of the invention, the nucleotide sequence of the *N. meningitidis*, serotype C hemoglobin receptor gene is the sequence depicted in Figure 2 (SEQ ID No:1). In another example of this embodiment of the invention, the nucleic acid probes comprise a specifically-hybridizing fragment of a 2373bp, polymerase chain reaction-amplified fragment of *N. meningitidis*, serotype A genomic DNA. In this embodiment, the nucleotide sequence comprises all or a specifically-hybridizing fragment of an open reading frame of 2370 nucleotides of *N. meningitidis*, serotype A genomic DNA encoding 790 amino acids comprising the hemoglobin receptor gene. In this embodiment of the invention, the nucleotide sequence of the *N. meningitidis*, serotype A hemoglobin receptor gene is the sequence depicted in Figure 3 (SEQ ID No:3). In yet another example of this embodiment of the invention, the nucleic acid probes comprise a specifically-hybridizing fragment of a 2376bp, polymerase chain reaction-amplified fragment of *N. meningitidis*, serotype B genomic DNA. In this embodiment, the nucleotide sequence comprises all or a specifically-hybridizing fragment

of an open reading frame of 2373 nucleotides of *N. meningitidis*, serotype B genomic DNA encoding 791 amino acids comprising the hemoglobin receptor gene. In this embodiment of the invention, the nucleotide sequence of the *N. meningitidis*, serotype B hemoglobin receptor gene

a is the sequence depicted in Figure 8 (SEQ ID No:5). The invention also provides nucleic acid

5 hybridization probes comprising a bacterial hemoglobin receptor gene isolated from *N. gonorrhoeae*. In a preferred embodiment of this aspect of the invention, the nucleic acid probes comprise a specifically-hybridizing fragment of a 2378bp, polymerase chain reaction-amplified fragment of *N. gonorrhoeae* genomic DNA. In this embodiment, the nucleotide sequence comprises all or a specifically-hybridizing fragment of an open reading frame of 2373

10 nucleotides of *N. gonorrhoeae* genomic DNA encoding 791 amino acids comprising the hemoglobin receptor gene. In this embodiment of the invention, the nucleotide sequence of the

a *N. gonorrhoeae* hemoglobin receptor gene is the sequence depicted in Figure 9 (SEQ ID No:7).

15 It will be understood that the term "specifically-hybridizing" when used to describe a fragment of a nucleic acid encoding a bacterial hemoglobin receptor gene is intended to mean that nucleic acid hybridization of such a fragment is stable under high stringency conditions of hybridization and washing as the term "high stringency" would be understood by those having skill in the molecular biological arts.

Also provided by the invention are therapeutic agents and methods for using such agents

a for treating an infection in a human, with bacteria of a *Neisseria* species. In preferred embodiments, such agents comprise antibodies that are immunologically reactive with a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein. In a preferred embodiment, such antibodies are raised against a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from bacteria of *Neisseria* species. In a particularly preferred embodiment, such antibodies are specific for the hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from *Neisseria meningitidis*, serotypes A, B or C. In additional preferred

25 embodiments, such antibodies are specific for the hemoglobin receptor protein isolated from *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*. Therapeutic agents provided in this aspect of the invention comprise such antibodies in a pharmaceutically-acceptable carrier, along with appropriate adjuvants and the like. In additional embodiments, such antibodies are covalently conjugated to a bactericidal

or bacteriostatic agent effective against bacteria of *Neisseria* species, preferably *N. meningitidis* and *N. gonorrhoeae*.

In yet another embodiment of this aspect of the invention are provided therapeutic reagents and methods for using such reagents wherein said reagents comprise recombinant expression constructs of the invention, or a homologue thereof that expresses the nucleic acid encoding a hemoglobin receptor in an antisense orientation. In a preferred embodiment, the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein gene is isolated from bacteria of *Neisseria* species. In a particularly preferred embodiment, the hemoglobin receptor protein gene is isolated from *Neisseria meningitidis*. In particular examples of this embodiment of the invention, the nucleic acids comprise a specifically-hybridizing fragment of a 3.3 kilobase (kb) *Bam*HI/*Hind*III fragment of *N. meningitidis*, serotype C genomic DNA. In this embodiment, the nucleotide sequence comprises all or a specifically-hybridizing fragment of an open reading frame of 2376 nucleotides of *N. meningitidis*, serotype C genomic DNA encoding 792 amino acids comprising the hemoglobin receptor gene. In this embodiment of the invention, the nucleotide sequence of the *N. meningitidis*, serotype C hemoglobin receptor gene is the sequence depicted in ^{Figure 2A-2H} (SEQ ID No:1). In another example of this embodiment of the invention, the nucleic acid probes comprise a specifically-hybridizing fragment of a 2373bp, polymerase chain reaction-amplified fragment of *N. meningitidis*, serotype A genomic DNA. In this embodiment, the nucleotide sequence comprises all or a specifically-hybridizing fragment of an open reading frame of 2370 nucleotides of *N. meningitidis*, serotype A genomic DNA encoding 790 amino acids comprising the hemoglobin receptor gene. In this embodiment of the invention, the nucleotide sequence of the *N. meningitidis*, serotype A hemoglobin receptor gene is the sequence depicted in ^{Figure 7A-7H} (SEQ ID No:3). In yet another example of this embodiment of the invention, the nucleic acid probes comprise a specifically-hybridizing fragment of a 2376bp, polymerase chain reaction-amplified fragment of *N. meningitidis*, serotype B genomic DNA. In this embodiment, the nucleotide sequence comprises all or a specifically-hybridizing fragment of an open reading frame of 2373 nucleotides of *N. meningitidis*, serotype B genomic DNA encoding 791 amino acids comprising the hemoglobin receptor gene. In this embodiment of the invention, the nucleotide sequence of the *N. meningitidis*, serotype B hemoglobin receptor gene

Figure 8A-8I

is the sequence depicted in *Figure 8* (SEQ ID No:5). The invention also provides recombinant expression constructs of the invention, or a homologue thereof that expresses the nucleic acid encoding a hemoglobin receptor in an antisense orientation, wherein the nucleic acid encodes a bacterial hemoglobin receptor gene isolated from *N. gonorrhoeae*. In a preferred embodiment of this aspect of the invention, the nucleic acid probes comprise a specifically-hybridizing fragment of a 2378bp, polymerase chain reaction-amplified fragment of *N. gonorrhoeae* genomic DNA. In this embodiment, the nucleotide sequence comprises all or a specifically-hybridizing fragment of an open reading frame of 2373 nucleotides of *N. gonorrhoeae* genomic DNA encoding 791 amino acids comprising the hemoglobin receptor gene. In this embodiment of the invention, the nucleotide sequence of the *N. gonorrhoeae* hemoglobin receptor gene is the sequence depicted in *Figure 9* (SEQ ID No:7).

The invention also provides a method for screening compounds for their ability to inhibit, facilitate or modulate the biochemical activity of a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein of the invention, for use in the *in vitro* screening of novel agonist and antagonist compounds and novel bactericidal and bacteriostatic agents specific for the hemoglobin receptor protein. In preferred embodiments, cells transformed with a recombinant expression construct of the invention are contacted with such a compound, and the binding capacity of the compounds, as well as the effect of the compound on binding of other, known hemoglobin receptor agonists, such as hemoglobin and hemin, and antagonists, is assayed. Additional preferred embodiments comprise quantitative analyses of such effects.

The present invention is also useful for the detection of bactericidal and/or bacteriostatic analogues, agonists or antagonists, ~~known or unknown~~ ^{Recognized or Unrecognized}, of a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein, preferably derived from bacteria of *Neisseria* species, most preferably isolated from *N. meningitidis*, wherein such compounds are either naturally occurring or embodied as a drug.

The invention also provides vaccines for immunizing a human against infection with pathogenic bacteria of *Neisseria* species, the vaccines comprising the hemoglobin binding proteins of the invention or antigenic fragments thereof. In a preferred embodiment, the vaccines of the invention comprise cells expressing a hemoglobin receptor binding protein of the invention, or an antigenic fragment thereof, preferably wherein said cells are attenuated varieties

of cells adapted for growth in humans, *i.e.*, wherein such cells are non-pathogenic and do not cause bactemia, endotoxemia or sepsis. Examples of such attenuated varieties of cells include attenuated strains of *Salmonella* species, for example *Salmonella typhi* and *Salmonella typhimurium*, as well as other attenuated bacterial species. Also provided by the invention are recombinant expression constructs as disclosed herein useful *per se* as vaccines, for introduction into an animal and production of an immunologic response to bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein antigens encoded therein.

Specific preferred embodiments of the present invention will become evident from the following more detailed description of certain preferred embodiments and the claims.

10

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The foregoing and other objects of the present invention, the various features thereof, as well as the invention itself may be more fully understood from the following description, when read together with the accompanying drawings in which:

Figure 1 is a schematic drawing of the restriction enzyme digestion map of a *N. meningitidis* cosmid clone and subclones thereof derived as described in Example 2.
15 *Figure 2a-2b*
a Figure 2 illustrates the nucleotide (SEQ ID No.:1) and deduced amino acid (SEQ ID No.:2) sequences of the *N. meningitidis* hemoglobin receptor protein encoded in a 3.3 kb *Bam*HI/*Hind*III DNA fragment.

Figure 3 presents a photograph of a stained SDS/ 10% PAGE electrophoresis gel showing the results of *in vitro* expression of the *N. meningitidis* hemoglobin receptor gene product as an approximately 90 kilodalton protein, and β -lactamase protein having a molecular weight of about 30.0 kilodaltons used as a molecular weight marker.
20 *Figure 4a-4c*

a Figure 4 presents an amino acid sequence comparison between portions of the *N. meningitidis* transferrin receptor Tbp1 (SEQ ID No.:9), the *N. meningitidis* lactoferrin receptor LbpA (SEQ ID No.:10), and *N. meningitidis* hemoglobin receptor HmbR (SEQ ID No.:2).
25

Figure 5 illustrates Southern hybridization analysis of chromosomal DNA from *N. meningitidis* 8013 and the MC8013*hmbR* mutant using a *Bam*HI-*Sal*I fragment of the *hmb* gene as probe labeled using a DIG nonradioactive DNA labelling and detection kit (Boehringer

Mannheim Biochemicals, Indianapolis, IN). Lane 1 contains DNA from *N. meningitidis* strain MC8013, digested with *Clal*; lane 2 is MC8031*hmbR* DNA digested with *Clal*; lane 3, is MC8013 DNA digested with *BamHI* and *SalI*; and lane 4 is MC8013*hmbR* DNA digested with *BamHI* and *SalI*.

5 Figure 6 is a graph describing the course of infection using *N. meningitidis* wild type (MC8013) and *hmbR* mutant strains in an *in vivo* rat infant infection model. Each strain was injected intraperitoneally (2×10^6 CFU) into three infant inbred Lewis rats. The results represent the average of two similarly-performed experiments.

10 *a* Figure 7 illustrates the nucleotide (SEQ ID No.:3) and deduced amino acid (SEQ ID No.:4) sequences of the *N. meningitidis*, serotype A hemoglobin receptor protein encoded on a 2373bp polymerase chain reaction-amplified DNA fragment.

15 *a* Figure 8 illustrates the nucleotide (SEQ ID No.:5) and deduced amino acid (SEQ ID No.:6) sequences of the *N. meningitidis*, serotype B hemoglobin receptor protein encoded on a 2376bp polymerase chain reaction-amplified DNA fragment.

20 *a* Figure 9 illustrates the nucleotide (SEQ ID No.:7) and deduced amino acid (SEQ ID No.:8) sequences of the *N. gonorrhoeae* hemoglobin receptor protein encoded on a 2376bp polymerase chain reaction-amplified DNA fragment.

25 Figure 10 represents a schematic of a nucleic acid sequence comparison between the hemoglobin receptor proteins derived from *N. meningitidis*, serotypes A (SEQ ID No.:3), B (SEQ ID No.:5) and C (SEQ ID No.:1) and from *N. gonorrhoeae* (SEQ ID No.:7), wherein the direction of transcription of the genes is in the direction of the arrow, and the following abbreviations refer to restriction endonuclease sites: H represents *HindIII*; N represents *NotI*; Bg represents *BglI*; Bs represents *BssHI*; Nr represents *NruI*; Cl represents *Clal*; P represents *PstI*; Sa represents *SacI*; Av represents *Aval*; B represents *BamHI*; S represents *SalI*; EV represents *EcoRV*; Sh represents *SphI*; and Sy represents *StyI*.

30 *a* Figure 11 presents an amino acid sequence comparison between the hemoglobin receptor proteins derived from *N. meningitidis*, serotypes A (SEQ ID No.:4), B (SEQ ID No.:6) and C (SEQ ID No.:2) and from *N. gonorrhoeae* (SEQ ID No.:8).

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

The term "bacterial hemoglobin receptor" as used herein refers to bacterial proteins comprising the outer membrane of Gram negative bacteria, which specifically mediate transit of hemoglobin-derived hemin, as well as hemin from other sources, through the outer membrane of such bacteria and into the periplasmic space. The bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins of the invention are characterized by, first, an amino acid sequence that is essentially the sequence depicted in Figures 2 (SEQ ID No.:2), 7 (SEQ ID No.:4), 8 (SEQ ID No.:6) and 9 (SEQ ID No.:8). The bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins of the invention are further characterized by having substantially the same biological activity as a protein having the amino acid sequence depicted in Figures 2 (SEQ ID No.:2), 7 (SEQ ID No.:4), 8 (SEQ ID No.:6) and 9 (SEQ ID No.:8). This definition is intended to encompass naturally-occurring variants and mutant proteins, as well as genetically engineered variants made by man.

Cloned, isolated and purified nucleic acid provided by the present invention may encode a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein of any *Neisseria* species of origin, including, most preferably, *Neisseria meningitidis* species and serotypes thereof and *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* species.

The nucleic acid hybridization probes provided by the invention comprise DNA or RNA having all or a specifically-hybridizing fragment of the nucleotide sequence of the hemoglobin receptor protein as depicted in Figures 2 (SEQ ID No.:1), 7 (SEQ ID No.:3), 8 (SEQ ID No.:5) and 9 (SEQ ID No.:7), or any portion thereof effective in nucleic acid hybridization. Mixtures of such nucleic acid hybridization probes are also within the scope of this embodiment of the invention. Nucleic acid probes as provided herein are useful for detecting the presence of a bacteria, *inter alia*, in a human as the result of an infection, in contaminated biological samples and specimens, in foodstuffs and water supplies, or in any substance that may come in to contact with the human. Specific hybridization will be understood to mean that the nucleic acid probes of the invention are capable of forming stable, specific hybridization to bacterially-derived DNA or RNA under conditions of high stringency, as the term "high stringency" would be understood by those with skill in the art (see, for example, Sambrook *et al.*, 1989, Molecular Cloning: A Laboratory Manual, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y. and Hames and Higgins, eds., 1985, Nucleic Acid Hybridization, IRL Press, Oxford, U.K.).

Hybridization will be understood to be accomplished using well-established techniques, including but not limited to Southern blot hybridization, Northern blot hybridization, *in situ* hybridization and Southern hybridization to polymerase chain reaction product DNAs. The invention will thus be understood to provide oligonucleotides, specifically, pairs of oligonucleotides, for use as 5 primers in support of *in vitro* amplification of bacterial hemoglobin receptor genes and mRNA transcripts.

The production of proteins such as bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins from cloned genes by genetic engineering means is well known in this art. The discussion which follows is accordingly intended as an overview of this field, and is not intended to reflect the full state of 10 the art. It will be understood from the following discussion that the hemoglobin receptor protein genes of this invention are particularly advantageous, since expression of such proteins by bacteria, including non-*Neisseria* species of bacteria, can complement certain auxotrophic mutants of said transformed bacteria otherwise unable to subsist absent supplementation of the growth media with iron (III).

15 (A) DNA encoding a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein, in view of the instant disclosure, by chemical synthesis, by screening reverse transcripts of mRNA from appropriate cells, by screening genomic libraries from appropriate cells, or by combinations of these procedures, as illustrated below. Screening of mRNA or genomic DNA may be carried out with oligonucleotide probes generated from the nucleic acid sequence information from the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein disclosed herein. Probes may be labeled with a detectable group such as a fluorescent group, a radioactive atom or a chemiluminescent group in accordance with know procedures and used in conventional hybridization assays, as described in greater detail in the Examples below. In the alternative, bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein-encoding nucleic acids may be obtained by use of the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) procedure, using 20 appropriate pairs of PCR oligonucleotide primers corresponding to nucleic acid sequence information derived from a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein as provided herein. See U.S. Patent Nos. 4,683,195 to Mullis *et al.* and 4,683,202 to Mullis, as specifically disclosed herein in Example 9 below. In another alternative, such bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein-encoding

nucleic acids may be isolated from auxotrophic cells transformed with a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein gene, thereby relieved of the nutritional requirement for uncomplexed iron (III).

Any bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein of the invention may be synthesized in host cells transformed with a recombinant expression construct comprising a nucleic acid encoding the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein. Such recombinant expression constructs can also be comprised of a vector that is a replicable DNA construct. Vectors are used herein either to amplify DNA encoding a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein and/or to express DNA encoding a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein. For the purposes of this invention, a recombinant expression construct is a replicable DNA construct in which a nucleic acid encoding a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein is operably linked to suitable control sequences capable of effecting the expression of the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein in a suitable host cell.

The need for such control sequences will vary depending upon the host cell selected and the transformation method chosen. Generally, bacterial control sequences include a transcriptional promoter, an optional operator sequence to control transcription, a sequence encoding suitable mRNA ribosomal binding sites (the Shine-Delgarno sequence), and sequences which control the termination of transcription and translation. Amplification vectors do not require expression control domains. All that is needed is the ability to replicate in a host, usually conferred by an origin of replication, and a selection gene to facilitate recognition of transformants. *See, Sambrook et al., 1989, ibid.*

Vectors useful for practicing the present invention include plasmids and virus-derived constructs, including phage and particularly bacteriophage, and integratable DNA fragments (i.e., fragments integratable into the host genome by homologous recombination). The vector replicates and functions independently of the host genome, or may, in some instances, integrate into the genome itself. Suitable vectors will contain replicon and control sequences which are derived from species compatible with the intended expression host. A preferred vector is pLAFR2 (*see Riboli et al., 1991, Microb. Pathogen. 10: 393-403.*)

Transformed host cells are cells which have been transformed or transfected with recombinant expression constructs made using recombinant DNA techniques and comprising nucleic acid encoding a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein. Preferred host cells are cells of *Neisseria* species, particularly *N. meningitidis*, as well as *Salmonella typhi* and *Salmonella*

5 *typhimurium* species, and *Escherichia coli* auxotrophic mutant cells (*hemA aroB*). Transformed host cells may express the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein, but host cells transformed for purposes of cloning or amplifying nucleic acid hybridization probe DNA need not express the receptor protein. When expressed, the bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein of the invention will typically be located in the host cell outer membrane. *See, Sambrook et al., ibid.*

10 Cultures of bacterial cells, particularly cells of *Neisseria* species, and certain *E. coli* mutants, are a desirable host for recombinant bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein synthesis. In principal, any bacterial cell auxotrophic for uncomplexed iron (III) is useful for selectively growing bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein-transformed cells. However, for this purpose, well-characterized auxotrophs, such as *E. coli hemA aroB* mutants are preferred.

15 The invention provides homogeneous compositions of a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein produced by transformed cells as provided herein. Each such homogeneous composition is intended to be comprised of a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein that comprises at least 90% of the protein in such a homogenous composition. The invention also provides membrane preparations from cells expressing a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein as the result of transformation with a recombinant expression construct of the invention, as described herein.

20 Bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins, peptide fragments thereof and membranes derived from cells expressing such proteins in accordance with the present invention may be used for the production of vaccines effective against bacterial infections in a human, with pathogenic microorganisms expressing such bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins. Such vaccines preferably would be effective in raising an immunological response against bacteria of *Neisseria* species, most preferably *N. meningitidis* and *N. gonorrhoeae*. Also encompassed within the vaccines provided by the invention are recombinant expression constructs as disclosed herein useful *per se* as vaccines, for introduction into an animal and production of an immunologic 25 response to bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein antigens encoded therein.

Preparation of vaccines which contain polypeptide or polynucleotide sequences as active ingredients is well understood in the art. Typically, such vaccines are prepared as injectables, either as liquid solutions or suspensions. However, solid forms suitable for solution in, or suspension in, liquid prior to injection may also be prepared. The preparation may also be

emulsified. The active immunogenic ingredient is often mixed with excipients which are pharmaceutically acceptable and compatible with the active ingredient. Suitable excipients are, for example, water, saline, dextrose, glycerol, ethanol, or the like and combinations thereof. In addition, if desired, the vaccine may contain minor amounts of auxiliary substances such as wetting or emulsifying agents, pH buffering agents, or adjuvants which enhance the effectiveness of the vaccine. The vaccines are conventionally administered parenterally, by injection, for example, either subcutaneously or intramuscularly. Additional formulations which are suitable for other modes of administration include suppositories and, in some cases, oral formulations. For suppositories, traditional binders and carriers may include, for example, polyalkalene glycols or triglycerides; such suppositories may be formed from mixtures containing the active ingredient in the range of 0.5% to 10%, preferably 1 to 2%. Oral formulations include such normally employed excipients as, for example, pharmaceutical grades of ~~mannitol~~^{mannitol}, lactose, starch, magnesium stearate, sodium saccharine, cellulose, magnesium carbonate and the like. These compositions take the form of solutions, suspensions, tablets, pills, capsules, sustained release formulations or powders and contain 10% to 95% of active ingredient, preferably 25 to 70%.

The polypeptides of the invention may be formulated into the vaccine as neutral or salt forms. Pharmaceutically acceptable salts/ include the acid additional salts (formed with the free amino groups of the peptide) and which are formed with inorganic acids such as, for example, hydrochloric or phosphoric acids, or such organic acids as acetic, oxalic, tartaric, mandelic, and the like. Salts formed with the free carboxyl groups may also be derived from inorganic bases such as, for example, sodium, potassium, ammonium, calcium, or ferric hydroxides, and such organic bases as isopropylamine, trimethylamine, 2-ethylamino ethanol, histidine, procaine, and the like.

In another embodiment, such vaccines are provided wherein the bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins or peptide fragments thereof are present in the intact cell membranes of cells expressing such proteins in accordance with the present invention. In preferred embodiments, cells useful in these embodiments include attenuated varieties of cells adapted to growth in humans. Most preferably, said cells are attenuated varieties of cells adapted for growth in humans, *i.e.*, wherein such cells do not cause frank disease or other pathological conditions, such as bacteremia, endotoxemia or sepsis. For the purposes of this invention, "attenuated" cells

will be understood to encompass prokaryotic and eukaryotic cells that do not cause infection, disease, septicemia, endotoxic shock, pyrogenic shock, or other serious and adverse reactions to administration of vaccines to an animal, most preferably a human, when such cells are introduced into the animal, whether such cells are viable, living, heat-, chemically- or genetically attenuated or inactivated, or dead. It will be appreciated by those with skill in this art that certain minor side-effects of vaccination, such as short-term fever, muscle discomfort, general malaise, and other well-known reactions to vaccination using a variety of different types of vaccines, can be anticipated as accompanying vaccination of an animal, preferably a human, using the vaccines of the invention. Such acute, short-term and non-life-threatening side effects are encompassed in the instant definition of the vaccines of the invention, and vaccines causing such side-effects fall within the definition of "attenuated" presented herein. Preferred examples of such attenuated cells include ^{attenuated} varieties of *Salmonella* species, preferably *Salmonella typhi* and *Salmonella typhimurium*, as well as other attenuated bacterial species. It will be specifically understood that these embodiments of the vaccines of the invention encompass so-called "live" attenuated cell preparations as well as heat- or chemically-inactivated cell preparations.

In other embodiments of the invention are provided vaccines that are DNA vaccines, comprising the nucleic acids of the invention in recombinant expression constructs competent to direct expression of hemoglobin receptor proteins when introduced into an animal. In preferred embodiments, such DNA vaccines comprise recombinant expression constructs wherein the hemoglobin receptor-encoding nucleic acids of the invention are operably linked to promoter elements, most preferably the early gene promoter of cytomegalovirus or the early gene promoter of simian virus 40. DNA vaccines of the invention are preferably administered by intramuscular injection, but any appropriate route of administration, including oral, transdermal, rectal, nasal, aerosol administration into lung, or any other clinically-acceptable route of administration can be used by those with skill in the art.

In general, the vaccines of the invention are administered in a manner compatible with the dosage formulation, and in such amount as will be therapeutically effective and immunogenic. The quantity to be administered depends on the subject to be treated, capacity of the subject's immune system to synthesize antibodies, and the degree of protection desired. Precise amounts of active ingredient required to be administered depend on the judgment of the practitioner and are peculiar to each individual. However, suitable dosage ranges are of the

order of several hundred micrograms active ingredient per individual. Suitable regimes for initial administration and booster shots are also variable, but are typified by an initial administration followed in one or two week intervals by a subsequent injection or other administration.

5 The recombinant expression constructs of the present invention are also useful in molecular biology to transform bacterial cells which do not ordinarily express a hemoglobin receptor protein to thereafter express this receptor. Such cells are useful, *inter alia*, as intermediates for making cell membrane preparations useful for receptor binding activity assays, vaccine production, and the like, and in certain embodiments may themselves be used, *inter alia*,
10 as vaccines or components of vaccines, as described above. The recombinant expression constructs of the present invention thus provide a method for screening potentially useful bactericidal and bacteriostatic drugs at advantageously lower cost than conventional screening protocols. While not completely eliminating the need for ultimate *in vivo* activity and toxicology assays, the constructs and cultures of the invention provide an important first screening step for
15 the vast number of potentially useful bactericidal and bacteriostatic drugs synthesized, discovered or extracted from natural sources each year. In addition, such bactericidal or bacteriostatic drugs would be selected to utilize a nutritional pathway associated with infectious virulence in these types of bacteria, as disclosed in more detail below, thus selectively targeting bacteria associated with the development of serious infections *in vivo*.

20 Also, the invention provides both functional bacterial hemoglobin receptor proteins, membranes comprising such proteins, cells expressing such proteins, and the amino acid sequences of such proteins. This invention thereby provides sufficient structural and functional activity information to enable rational drug design of novel therapeutically-active antibacterial drugs using currently-available techniques (see Walters, "Computer-Assisted Modeling of
25 Drugs", in Klegerman & Groves, eds., 1993, Pharmaceutical Biotechnology, Interpharm Press: Buffalo Grove, IL, pp. 165-174).

30 Nucleic acids and oligonucleotides of the present invention are useful as diagnostic tools for detecting the existence of a bacterial infection in a human, caused by a hemoglobin receptor protein-expressing pathological organism of *Neisseria* species. Such diagnostic reagents comprise nucleic acid hybridization probes of the invention and encompass paired oligonucleotide PCR primers, as described above. Methods provided by the invention include blot hybridization, *in situ* hybridization and *in vitro* amplification techniques for detecting the

presence of pathogenic bacteria in a biological sample. Appropriate biological samples advantageously screened using the methods described herein include plasma, serum, lymph, cerebrospinal fluid, seminal fluid, mucosal tissue samples, biopsy samples, and other potential sites of bacterial infection. It is also envisioned that the methods of the invention may be used 5 to screen water, foodstuffs, pharmaceuticals, and other potential sources of infection.

The invention also provides antibodies that are immunologically reactive to a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein or epitopes thereof provided by the invention. The antibodies provided by the invention may be raised, using methods well known in the art, in animals by inoculation with cells that express a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein or epitopes thereof, 10 cell membranes from such cells, whether crude membrane preparations or membranes purified using methods well known in the art, or purified preparations of proteins, including fusion proteins, particularly fusion proteins comprising epitopes of a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein of the invention fused to heterologous proteins and expressed using genetic engineering means in bacterial, yeast or eukaryotic cells, said proteins being isolated from such cells to varying degrees of homogeneity using conventional biochemical means. Synthetic peptides made using established synthetic means *in vitro* and optionally conjugated with heterologous sequences 15 of amino acids, are also encompassed in these methods to produce the antibodies of the invention. Animals that are used for such inoculations include individuals from species comprising cows, sheep, pigs, mice, rats, rabbits, hamsters, goats and primates. Preferred animals for inoculation are rodents (including mice, rats, hamsters) and rabbits. The most preferred animal is the mouse.

Cells that can be used for such inoculations, or for any of the other means used in the invention, include any cell that naturally expresses a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein as provided by the invention, or any cell or cell line that expresses a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein of the invention, or any epitope thereof, as a result of molecular or genetic engineering, 25 or that has been treated to increase the expression of an endogenous or heterologous bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein by physical, biochemical or genetic means. Preferred cells are *E. coli* auxotrophic mutant *hemA aroB* cells transformed with a recombinant expression construct of the invention and grown in media supplemented with hemin or hemoglobin as the sole iron 30 (III) source, and cells of *Neisseria* species.

The present invention also provides monoclonal antibodies that are immunologically reactive with an epitope of a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein of the invention, or fragment thereof, present on the surface of such cells, preferably *E. coli* cells. Such antibodies are made using methods and techniques well known to those of skill in the art. Monoclonal antibodies provided by the present invention are produced by hybridoma cell lines, that are also provided by the invention and that are made by methods well known in the art (see Harlow and Lane, 1988, Antibodies: A Laboratory Manual, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y.).

Hybridoma cell lines are made by fusing individual cells of a myeloma cell line with spleen cells derived from animals immunized with a homogeneous preparation of a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein, membranes comprised thereof, cells expressing such protein, or epitopes of a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein, used *per se* or comprising a heterologous or fusion protein construct, as described above. The myeloma cell lines used in the invention include lines derived from myelomas of mice, rats, hamsters, primates and humans. Preferred myeloma cell lines are from mouse, and the most preferred mouse myeloma cell line is P3X63-Ag8.653. ^{Preferred} The animals from whom spleens are obtained after immunization are rats, mice and hamsters, preferably mice, most preferably Balb/c mice. Spleen cells and myeloma cells are fused using a number of methods well known in the art, including but not limited to incubation with inactivated Sendai virus and incubation in the presence of polyethylene glycol (PEG). The most preferred method for cell fusion is incubation in the presence of a solution of 45% (w/v) PEG-1450. Monoclonal antibodies produced by hybridoma cell lines can be harvested from cell culture supernatant fluids from *in vitro* cell growth; alternatively, hybridoma cells can be injected subcutaneously and/or into the peritoneal cavity of an animal, most preferably a mouse, and the monoclonal antibodies obtained from blood and/or ascites fluid.

Monoclonal antibodies provided by the present invention are also produced by recombinant genetic methods well known to those of skill in the art, and the present invention encompasses antibodies made by such methods that are immunologically reactive with an epitope of a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein of the invention. The present invention also encompasses fragments, including but not limited to F(ab) and F(ab)₂ fragments, of such antibody. Fragments are produced by any number of methods, including but not limited to

proteolytic cleavage, chemical synthesis or preparation of such fragments by means of genetic engineering technology. The present invention also encompasses single-chain antibodies that are immunologically reactive with an epitope of a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein, made by methods known to those of skill in the art.

5 The antibodies and fragments used herein can be labeled preferably with radioactive labels, by a variety of techniques. For example, the biologically active molecules can also be labeled with a radionucleotide via conjugation with the cyclic anhydride of diethylenetriamine penta-acetic acid (DPTA) or bromoacetyl aminobenzyl ethylamine diamine tetra-acidic acid (BABE). *See Hnatowich et al. (1983, Science 220: 613-615) and Meares et al. (1984, Anal. Biochem. 142: 68-78, both references incorporated by reference)* for further description of labeling techniques.

10 The present invention also encompasses an epitope of a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein of the invention, comprised of sequences and/or a conformation of sequences present in the receptor molecule. This epitope may be naturally occurring, or may be the result of proteolytic cleavage of a receptor molecule and isolation of an epitope-containing peptide or may be obtained by synthesis of an epitope-containing peptide using methods well known to those skilled in the art. The present invention also encompasses epitope peptides produced as a result of genetic engineering technology and synthesized by genetically engineered prokaryotic or eukaryotic cells.

15 The invention also includes chimeric antibodies, comprised of light chain and heavy chain peptides immunologically reactive to a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein-derived epitope. The chimeric antibodies embodied in the present invention include those that are derived from naturally occurring antibodies as well as chimeric antibodies made by means of genetic engineering technology well known to those of skill in the art.

20 Also provided by the present invention are diagnostic and therapeutic methods of detecting and treating an infection in a human, by *pathogenic* organisms expressing a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein. Diagnostic reagents for use in such methods include the antibodies, most preferably monoclonal antibodies, of the invention. Such antibodies are used in conventional immunological techniques, including but not limited to enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA), radioimmune assay (RIA), Western blot assay, immunological

titration assays, immunological diffusion assays (such as the Ouchterlony assay), and others known to those of skill in the art. Also provided are epitopes derived from a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein of the invention and immunologically cross-reactive to said antibodies, for use in any of the immunological techniques described herein.

5 Additional diagnostic assays include nucleic acid hybridization assays, using the nucleic acids of the invention or specifically-hybridizing fragments thereof, for sensitive detection of bacterial genomic DNA and/or mRNA. Such assays include various blot assays, such as Southern blots, Northern blots, dot blots, slot blots and the like, as well as *in vitro* amplification assays, such as the polymerase chain reaction assay (PCR), reverse transcriptase-polymerase 10 chain reaction assay (RT-PCR), ligase chain reaction assay (LCR), and others known to those skilled in the art. Specific restriction endonuclease digestion of diagnostic fragments detected using any of the methods of the invention, analogous to restriction fragment linked polymorphism assays (RFLP) are also within the scope of this invention.

15 The invention also provides therapeutic methods and reagents for use in treating infections in a human, cause by a microorganism expressing a bacterial hemoglobin receptor protein of the invention, most preferably a bacteria of *Neisseria* species. Therapeutic reagents for use in such methods include the antibodies, most preferably monoclonal antibodies, of the invention, either *per se* or conjugated to bactericidal or bacteriostatic drugs or other antibiotic compounds effective against the infectious microorganism. In such embodiments, the antibodies 20 of the invention comprise pharmaceutical compositions, additionally comprising appropriate pharmaceutically-acceptable carriers and adjuvants or other ancillary components where necessary. Suitable carriers are, for example, water, saline, dextrose, glycerol, ethanol, or the like and combinations thereof. In addition, if desired, the pharmaceutical formulation may contain minor amounts of auxiliary substances such as wetting or emulsifying agents, pH 25 buffering agents, or other compounds which enhance the effectiveness of the antibody. In these embodiments, it will be understood that the therapeutic agents of the invention serve to target the infectious bacteria, either by immunologically "tagging" the bacteria with an antibody of the invention for recognition by cytotoxic cells of a human's immune system, or by specifically delivering an antimicrobial drug to the infectious microorganism *via* the bacterial hemoglobin 30 receptor protein.

Additional therapeutic reagents include the nucleic acids of the invention or fragments thereof, specifically antisense embodiments of such nucleic acids. Such antisense nucleic acids may be used themselves or embodied in a recombinant expression construct specific for antisense expression, wherein said construct is genetically engineered to co-opt a portion of the genome of a bacterial virus, preferably a bacteriophage, infectious for the bacterial pathogen responsible for the infection. In these embodiments, introduction of the antisense nucleic acids of the invention into the bacterial cell inhibits, attenuates or abolishes expression of the bacterial hemoglobin receptor, thereby reducing the virulence of the bacterial infection and enabling more effective antibacterial interventions. In additional embodiments, bacteriophage are provided bearing "knockout" copies of a bacterial hemoglobin receptor gene, whereby the phage achieves genetic mutation of the endogenous hemoglobin receptor gene in the infectious bacteria *via, for example*, homologous recombination of the exogenous knockout copy of the bacterial hemoglobin receptor gene with the endogenous hemoglobin receptor gene in the infectious microorganism.

The Examples which follow are illustrative of specific embodiments of the invention, and various uses thereof. They set forth for explanatory purposes only, and are not to be taken as limiting the invention.

EXAMPLE 1

Plasmids, bacteria, and media

Plasmids and bacteria used herein are listed on Table 1. *E. coli* strains were routinely grown in Luria-Bertani (LB) broth supplemented with 5-aminolevulinic acid and 50mg/L hemin chloride as necessary. *N. meningitidis* 8013 is a serogroup C clinical isolate (Nassif *et al.*, 1993, *Mol. Microbiol.* 8: 719-725). The meningococci were routinely grown on GCB agar (Difco) supplemented as described by Kellogg *et al.* (1963, *J. Bacteriol.* 85: 1274-1279), and incubated at 37°C under a 5% CO₂ atmosphere. Transformation of meningococci was performed as described by Nassif *et al.* (1992, *Mol. Microbiol.* 6: 591-597). When necessary, the following antibiotics were used with *E. coli*: rifampicin, 100 mg/L; tetracycline, 15 mg/L; kanamycin, 30 mg/L; chloramphenicol, 20 mg/L; carbenicillin, 100 mg/L. For *Neisseriae*, kanamycin at 100 mg/L was used when needed.

EXAMPLE 2

Auxotroph Complementation Cloning of a ~~hemoglobin~~^{hemoglobin} Receptor Gene from *Neisseria meningitidis*

5a In order to identify *N. meningitidis* outer membrane receptor(s) involved in the uptake of *hemin* and/or *haemoglobin* iron, an auxotroph complementation cloning strategy was used, similar to the approach previously taken to identify the *Y. enterocolitica* and *V. cholerae* hemin receptors (see Stojiljkovic and Hantke, 1992, *EMBO J.* **11**: 4359-4367; Henderson and Payne, 1994, *J. Bacteriol.* **176**: 3269-3277). This strategy is based on the fact that the outer membrane of Gram-negative bacteria is impermeable to hemin (McConville and Charles, 1979, *J. Microbiol.* **113**: 165-168) and therefore *E. coli* porphyrin biosynthesis mutants cannot grow on exogenously supplied hemin. If provided with the *N. meningitidis* outer membrane hemin receptor gene, the *E. coli* porphyrin mutant would be able to use exogenously supplied hemin as its porphyrin source.

A cosmid bank of *N. meningitidis* 8013 clone 6 DNA was prepared using conventional cosmid cloning methodologies (Sambrook *et al.*, 1989, *ibid.*). *N. meningitidis* bacterial DNA was partially digested by *Mbo*I, size fractionated on sucrose gradients and cloned into the *Bam*HI site of the cosmid vector pLAFR2 (Riboli *et al.*, 1991, *Microb. Pathogen.* **10**: 393-403). This cosmid bank was mobilized into the *E. coli* *hemA aroB Rif'* recipient strain by triparental matings using a conjugal plasmid pRK2013::Tn9. The mating mixture was plated on selective plates containing hemin chloride (50mg/L), 0.1 mM 2,2'-dipyridil and rifampicin (100 mg/L). Several clones growing on exogenously supplied ¹⁴hemin were isolated after an overnight incubation.

The hemin utilization phenotype of these transformants was tested by re-introduction of the cosmids into naive *E. coli* *hemA aroB* cells and by monitoring the growth on hemin-supplemented plates. The ability of *E. coli* strains to utilize heme or hemoglobin as the sole iron source was tested as previously described (Stojiljkovic and Hantke, 1992, *ibid.*). Cells were grown on LB agar supplemented with 50 μ M deferoxamine mesylate (an iron chelating agent, obtained from Sigma Chemical Co., St. Louis, MO). Filter discs (1/4 inches, Schleichner & Schuell, Inc., Keene, NH.) impregnated with the test compounds (20 μ L of 5 mg/ml stock solutions unless otherwise stated) were placed on these plates. After overnight growth at 37°C

TABLE I

	<u>STRAIN</u>	<u>GENOTYPE</u>
5	<i>E. coli</i> K12	
	EB53	<i>hemA, aroB, rpoB</i>
	KP1041	MC4100 tonB <i>::Km'</i>
	H1388	<i>exbB::Tn10 Δlac pro</i>
	TSM348	<i>endA, hsdR, pro, supF, pRK2013::Tn9</i>
10	IR754	EB53, <i>tonB::Km'</i>
	IR736	EB53, <i>exbB::Tn10</i>
	DH5 α	<i>recA, gyrB</i>
15	<i>N. meningitidis</i>	
	ATCC 13077	Serotype A
	--	Serotype B*
	MC8013	clone 6, wild type
	MChmbR	<i>hmbR::aphA-3</i>
20	<i>N. gonorrhoeae</i> MS11A	
	<u>PLASMIDS</u>	
	pSUSK	pA15 replicon, chloramphenicol ^r
	pHEM22	pLAFR2, hemoglobin-utilizing cosmid
	pHEM44	pLAFR2, hemin-utilizing cosmid
	pIRS508	6kb <i>ClaI</i> , pSUSK
25	pIRS523	3kb <i>BamHI/SalI</i> , pUC19
	pIRS525	1.2kb <i>aphA-3</i> , in <i>NotI</i> site of pIRS523
	pIRS527	4kb <i>BamHI/ClaI</i> , pBluescript
	pIRS528	0.7kb <i>NotI/BamHI</i> , pBluescript
30	pIRS692	3.3kb <i>BamHI/HindIII</i> , SU(SK)

* Laboratory collection

with 5% CO₂, zones of growth around the discs were monitored. The iron-bound proteins tested in this assay (all obtained from Sigma ^{Chemical} Co.) were hemoglobin from human, baboon, bovine and mouse sources, bovine hemin, human lactoferrin (90% iron saturated), and human transferrin (90% iron saturated, obtained from Boehringer Mannheim Biochemicals, Indianapolis, IN). A total of six hemin utilization positive cosmids were obtained using this protocol. Results using such assays are shown in Table II.

EXAMPLE 3

Restriction Enzyme Digestion Mapping of Hemin Utilization Positive Cosmids

Cosmid DNA from six hemin-utilization positive cosmids obtained as described in Example 2 were digested with *Clal*, and the resulting fragments were cloned into *Clal*-digested pSU(SK) vector (obtained from Stratagene, LaJolla, CA). One subclone, containing a 6 kb *Clal* fragment from cosmid cos22 (the resultant plasmid was designated pIRS508), was determined to allow utilization of hemin and hemoglobin by *E. coli hemA aroB* assayed as described in Example 2. Another such clone, containing an 11 kb *Clal* fragment from cos44 was also determined to allow hemin utilization in these auxotrophic mutant cells. Restriction analysis and Southern hybridization indicated that the DNA fragments originating from cos22 and cos44 are unrelated.

The deduced restriction enzyme digestion map of cosmid clone pIRS508 is shown in Figure 1. Plasmid pIRS508 enabled *E. coli hemA aroB* to use both hemin and bovine hemoglobin as iron sources although growth on hemoglobin was somewhat weaker than on hemin (Table II). Further subcloning localized the hemin/hemoglobin utilization locus to the *Bam*HI/*Hind*III fragment of the insert. In addition to sequences encoding the hemoglobin receptor gene (designated *hmbR*), sequences for a *Neisseria* insertion element (IS1106) and a portion of a *Neisseria* small repetitive element (IR1) are also represented in the Figure.

Table II

STRAIN	φ-TYPE	HEMIN IRON	PORPHYRIN	Hb IRON
<i>N. meningitidis</i>				
MC8013	wild type	+++	N.T.	+++
MChmbR	Hb ^R mutant	+++	N.T.	-
<i>E. coli</i>				
EB53	iron utilization ⁻	-	-	-
EB53 (pIRS508)	<i>tonB</i> ⁺ , <i>exbB</i> ⁺ , <i>hmbR</i> ⁺	+++	+++	+
IR754(pIRS508)	<i>tonB</i> , <i>exbB</i> ⁺ , <i>hmbR</i> ⁺	-	-	-
IR736(pIRS508)	<i>tonB</i> ⁺ , <i>exbB</i> , <i>hmbR</i> ⁺	-	-	-

N.T.-not tested. Use of hemin/hemoglobin as a porphyrin source was tested by scoring for growth of strains around hemin (5mg/mL) or hemoglobin (for *E. coli*, 10 mg/mL; for *N. meningitidis*, 5 mg/mL) discs on LB plates. The use of the hemin/hemoglobin as an iron source was tested similarly except NBD plates supplemented with 50 μL of 5 g/L delta-aminolevulinic acid were used (GCB plates supplemented with the 50μM Desferal in the case of *N. meningitidis*).

-: indicates no growth; +: less than 100 mm of growth zone around the disc; +++: ±15 mm of growth zone around the disc.

EXAMPLE 4
Nucleotide Sequence Analysis of a Cosmid Clone Encoding
a *Neisseria* Hemoglobin Receptor Gene

The nucleotide sequence of the 3.3 kb *Bam*HI-*Hind*III DNA fragment carrying the *hmbR* gene and its promoter region was determined using the dideoxy chain termination method using a Sequenase 2.0 kit (obtained from U.S. Biochemicals, Cleveland, OH) and analyzed using a BioRad electrophoresis system, an AutoRead kit (obtained from Pharmacia, Uppsala, SE) and an ALF-370 automatic sequenator (Pharmacia, Uppsala, Sweden). Plasmid subclones for sequencing were produced by a nested deletion approach using Erase-a-Base kit (obtained from Promega Biotech, Madison, WI) using different restriction sites in the *hmbR* gene. The nucleotide and predicted amino acid sequences of the *hmbR* gene are shown in Figure 2. ^{Figures 2A-2H}

An open reading frame (ORF) encoding the *N. meningitidis*, serotype C hemoglobin receptor protein begins at position 470 of the sequence and encodes a protein having an amino acid sequence of 792 amino acids, with a calculated molecular weight of 85.5 kDa. A Shine-Delgarno sequence (SD) is found at position 460. The HmbR receptor protein contains a signal peptidase I recognition sequence at residues 22 to 24 of the protein (underlined), consistent with the fact that it is an outer membrane protein.

A typical Fur binding nucleotide sequence (designated "Fur box") was found in the promoter region of the *hmbR* gene (Figure 2). Like hemin utilization in *Yersinia* and *Vibrio*, hemin and hemoglobin utilization in *Neisseria* are known to be iron-inducible phenotypes (West and Sparling, 1985, *Infect. Immun.* 47: 388-394; Dyer *et al.*, 1987, *Infect. Immun.* 55: 2171-2175). In Gram-negative bacteria, conditional expression of many iron utilization genes is regulated by the Fur repressor, which recognizes a 19 bp imperfect dyad repeat (Fur-box) in the promoter regions of Fur-repressed genes. Recently, a genetic screen (FURTA) for the identification of Fur-regulated genes from different Gram-negative bacteria was described (Stojiljkovic *et al.*, 1994, *J. Mol. Biol.* 236: 531-545), and this assay was used to test whether *hmbR* expression was controlled in this way. Briefly, a plasmid carrying a Fur-box sequence is transformed into an *E. coli* strain (H1717) which possesses a Fur-regulated *lac* fusion in the chromosome. Expression of this Fur-regulated *lac* fusion is normally repressed. Introduction of a multicopy Fur-box sequence on the plasmid titrates the available Fur repressor thus allowing

expression of the Fur-regulated *lac* fusion (this phenotype is termed FURTA positive). Using this screen, the smallest insert fragment from cosmid pIRS508 that produced a FURTA positive result was a 0.7 kb *Bam*HI-*Not*I DNA fragment carried on plasmid pIRS528 (see Figure 1).

5 a This result indicated that the 0.7 kb *Bam*HI-*Not*I fragment carries a Fur-box and that gene expression from the *hmbR* promoter is controlled by a *Fur*-type operon.

10 *N. meningitidis*, serotype C hemoglobin receptor protein was expressed *in vitro* using an *E. coli* S30 extract system from Promega Biotech (Madison, WI). The 3.3 kb *Bam*HI-*Hind*III fragment, expressed *in vitro*, encoded a 90kDa protein which corresponds in size to the predicted molecular weight of the unprocessed HmbR receptor. SDS/ 10% PAGE analysis showing the observed M_r of 90K is shown in Figure 3.

20 *a* Immediately downstream of the *hmbR* gene (at positions 2955 to 3000 bp in Figure 2) was found a short nucleotide sequence that is 99% identical to the flanking sequence of the PIII gene of *N. gonorrhoeae* (Gotschlich *et al.*, 1987, *J. Exp. Med.* 165: 471-482). The first 26 bp of this sequence represents one half of the inverted repeat (IR1) of the *N. gonorrhoeae* small repetitive element. This element is found in approximately 20 copies in both *N. gonorrhoeae* and *N. meningitidis* (Correia *et al.*, 1988, *J. Biol. Chem.* 263: 12194-12198). The analysis of the nucleotide sequence from position 3027 to the *Clal* (3984) restriction site (only the nucleotide sequence from *Bam*HI (1) to *Hind*III (3370) is shown in Figure 2) indicated the presence of an IS1106 element (Knight *et al.*, 1992, *Mol. Microbiol.* 6: 1565-1573). Interestingly, no nucleotide sequence similar to the IS1106 inverted repeat was found between the IR1 element and the beginning of the homology to IS1106.

25 These results were consistent with the cloning and identification of a novel hemoglobin receptor protein gene from *N. meningitidis*, embodied in a 3.3kb *Bam*HI/*Hind*III fragment of *N. meningitidis* genomic DNA.

25

EXAMPLE 5

Amino Acid Sequence Comparison of the *N. meningitidis* Hemoglobin Receptor Protein and *Neisseria* Lactoferrin and Transferrin Receptor Proteins

30 A comparison of the transferrin (Tbp1; Legrain *et al.*, 1993, *Gene* 130: 81-90), lactoferrin (LbpA; Pettersson *et al.*, 1993, *Infect. Immun.* 61: 4724-4733, and 1994, *J.*

Bacteriol. 176: 1764-1766) and hemoglobin receptors (HmbR) from *N. meningitidis* is shown in Figure 4. ^{Figures 4A-4C} The comparison was done with the CLASTAL program from the PC/GENE program package (Intelligenetics, Palo Alto, CA). Only the amino-terminal and carboxyl terminal segments of the proteins are shown. An asterisk indicates identity and a point indicates similarity at the amino acid level. Lactoferrin and transferrin receptors were found to share 44.4% identity in amino acid sequence. In contrast, homology between these proteins and the hemoglobin receptor disclosed herein was found to be significantly weaker (22% amino acid sequence identity with lactoferrin and 21% with transferrin receptor).

10

EXAMPLE 6

TonB/ExbBD-Dependence of Hemin Transport by the *N. meningitidis* Hemoglobin Receptor

It was known that the transport of iron-containing siderophores, some colicins and vitamin B12 across the outer membrane of *E. coli* depends on three cytoplasmic membrane proteins: TonB, ExbB and ExbD (Postle, 1990, *Mol. Microbiol.* 133: 891-898; Braun and Hantke, 1991, *in* Winkelmann, (ed.), Handbook of Microbial Iron Chelates, CRC Press, Boca Raton, Fla., pp. 107-138). In *Yersinia* and *Hemophilus*, hemin uptake was shown to be a TonB-dependent process (Stojiljkovic and Hantke, 1992, *ibid.*; Jarosik *et al.*, 1994, *Infect. Immun.* 62: 2470-2477). Through direct interaction between the outer membrane receptors and the TonB cytoplasmic machinery, the substrate bound to the receptor is internalized into the periplasm (Heller *et al.*, 1988, *Gene* 64: 147-153; Schoffler and Braun, 1989, *Molec. Gen. Genet.* 217: 378-383). This direct interaction has been associated with a particular amino acid sequence in membrane proteins associated with the TonB machinery.

All TonB-dependent receptors in Gram-negative bacteria contain several regions of high homology in their primary structures (Lundrigan and Kadner, 1986, *J. Biol. Chem.* 261: 10797-10801). In the amino acid sequence comparison described in Example 5, putative TonB-boxes of all three proteins are underlined. The carboxyl terminal end of the HmbR receptor contains the highly conserved terminal phenylalanine and position 782 arginine residues thought to be part of an outer membrane localization signal (Struyve *et al.*, 1991, *J. Mol. Biol.* 218: 141-148; Koebnik, 1993, *Trends Microbiol.* 1: 201). At residue 6 of the mature HmbR protein, an amino

acid sequence - ETTPVK - is similar in sequence to the so called TonB-boxes of several Gram-negative receptors (Heller *et al.*, 1988, *ibid.*). Interestingly, the putative TonB-box of HmbR has more homology to the TonB-box of the *N. gonorrhoeae* transferrin receptor (Cornelissen *et al.*, 1992, *J. Bacteriol.* **174**: 5788-5797) than to the TonB-boxes of *E. coli* siderophore receptors. When the sequence of the HmbR receptor was compared with other TonB-dependent receptors, the highest similarity was found with *Y. enterocolitica* HemR receptor although the similarity was not as high as to the *Neisseria* receptors.

In order to prove the TonB-dependent nature of the *N. meningitidis*, serotype C hemoglobin receptor, *hmbR* was introduced into *exbB* and *tonB* mutants of *E. coli* EB53, and the ability of the strains to utilize hemin and hemoglobin as porphyrin and iron sources was assessed. In these assays, both mutants of *E. coli* EB53 were unable to use hemin either as a porphyrin source or as an iron source in the presence of a functional *hmbR* (Table II). The usage of hemoglobin as an iron source was also affected (Table II). These results are consistent with the notion that the *hmbR* gene product, the *N. meningitidis* hemoglobin receptor protein of the invention, is TonB-dependent, since expression of this gene in TonB wild type *E. coli* supported the use of hemin and hemoglobin as sole iron source in the experiments disclosed in Example 2.

EXAMPLE 7

Functional Demonstration that the *hmbR* Gene Product is the Hemoglobin Receptor Protein in *N. meningitidis*

As shown in the data presented in Table II, *hmbR* mediated both hemin and hemoglobin utilization when expressed in *E. coli*, but hemoglobin utilization was less vigorous than hemin utilization. To determine if the HmbR receptor has the same specificity in *N. meningitidis*, *hmbR* was inactivated with a 1.2kb kanamycin cassette (*aphA-3*; Nassif *et al.*, 1991, *ibid.*) and transformed into wild-type *N. meningitidis* 8013 clone 6 (serotype C) cells. The inactivation of the chromosomal *hmbR* copy of the Km-resistant transformants was confirmed by Southern hybridization, as shown in Figure 5. As can be seen from Figure 5, wild-type *N. meningitidis* genomic DNA contains only one copy of the *hmbR* gene (lanes 1 and 3). In the Km^r transformants, the size of the DNA fragments containing the wild-type gene has increased by

1.2 kb, which is the size of the Kan cassette (Figure 5, lanes 2 and 4). When tested for its ability to utilize different iron-containing compounds, these mutant cells were found to be unable to use hemoglobin-bound iron, regardless of the source (human, bovine, baboon, mouse). The ability of the mutant to utilize hemoglobin-haptoglobin was not tested because the wild-type *N. meningitidis* strain is unable to use haptoglobin-haemoglobin complex as an iron source. However, the mutant was still able to use hemin iron, lactoferrin- and transferrin-bound iron as well as citrate-iron (Table II). As the iron-containing component of hemoglobin is hemin, a hemoglobin receptor would be expected to be capable of transporting hemin into the periplasm. Indeed, the cloning strategy disclosed herein depended on the ability of the cloned meningococcal receptor to transport hemin into the periplasm of *E. coli*. These results strongly suggest that *N. meningitidis* has at least two functional receptors that are involved in the internalization of hemin-containing compounds. One is the hemoglobin receptor described herein, which allows the utilization of both hemin and hemoglobin as iron sources. The other putative receptor in *N. meningitidis* is a hemin receptor which allows utilization of only hemin. This schema is also consistent with the isolation of several cosmid clones that allow *E. coli* EB53 to utilize hemin. DNAs from these cosmids do not hybridize with ^{the} *our hmbR probe*, indicating that these clones encode a structurally-distinct receptor protein capable of transporting hemin into the periplasm of *N. meningitidis* cells.

EXAMPLE 8

Attenuation of Virulence in *hmbR* Mutant *N. meningitidis* Cells *In Vivo*

In order to test the importance of hemoglobin and hemin scavenging systems of *N. meningitidis* *in vivo*, the *hmbR* -mutant and the wild type strain of *N. meningitidis*, serotype C were inoculated into 5 day old infant rats and the numbers of bacteria recovered from blood and cerebrospinal fluid were followed. In these experiments, the method for the assessing *N. meningitidis*, serotype C virulence potential was essentially the same as described by Nassif *et al.* (1992, *ibid.*) using infant inbred Lewis rats (Charles River, Saint Aubin les Elbeufs, France). Inbred rats were used to minimize individual variations. Briefly, the 8013 strain was reactivated by 3 animal passages. After the third passage, bacteria were kept frozen in aliquots at -80° C.

To avoid the possibility that modifications in the course of infection could result from selection of one spontaneous avirulent variant, one aliquot from the animal-passed frozen stock of 8013 was transformed with chromosomal DNA from the *hmbR* mutant, the resultant Kan^r transformants were pooled without further purification and kept frozen at -80°C. For each experiment, all infant rats were from the same litter. *N. meningitidis* 8013 was grown overnight and 2 X 10⁶ bacteria injected intraperitoneally into the infant rat. Three rats were used for each meningococcal strain. The course of infection was followed over a 24 hours time period with blood collected at the indicated times. At the 24 h time period, the rats were sacrificed, the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) collected and the number of colony-forming units (CFU) determined.

10 Each experiment was performed in replicate; similar results were obtained both times.

The results of these experiments are shown in Figure 6. The *hmbR* - strain, which is unable to use hemoglobin as an iron source, was recovered from the blood of infected animals in significantly lower numbers when compared with the wild type strain. Both the mutant and the wild type strain were still able to cross the blood-brain barrier as indicated by the isolation of bacteria from the cerebrospinal fluid. These results indicate that hemoglobin represents an important iron source for *N. meningitidis* during growth *in vivo*.

EXAMPLE 9

Polymerase Chain Reaction Amplification of Hemoglobin Receptor Genes from *N. meningitidis* Serotypes and *N. gonorrhoeae*

From the nucleotide sequence of the 3.3 kb *Bam*HI-*Hind*III DNA fragment carrying the *hmbR* gene and its promoter region was determined specific oligonucleotide primers for *in vitro* amplification of the homologous hemoglobin receptor protein genes from *N. meningitidis* serotypes A and B and *N. gonorrhoeae* MS11A as follows.

25 The following oligonucleotide primers were developed for *in vitro* amplification reactions using the polymerase chain reaction (PCR; Saiki *et al.*, 1988, *Science* **230**: 1350-1354):

5'-AACAGGTCTGGCATAG-3' (sense primer) (SEQ ID No.:11)

5'-CGCGAATTCAAACAGGTCTGGCATAG-3' (antisense primer) (SEQ ID No.:12)

for amplifying the hemoglobin receptor protein from *N. meningitidis*, serotype A;

30 5'-CGCGAATTCAAAAATTCCATTCCAGCGATACG-3' (sense primer) (SEQ ID No.:13)

5'-TAAAACCCATTCCAGCGATACG-3' (antisense primer) (SEQ ID No.:14)

for amplifying the hemoglobin receptor protein from *N. meningitidis*, serotype B;

5'-AACAGGTCTCGGCATAG-3' (sense primer) (SEQ ID No.:15)

or

5 5'-CGCGAATTCAAACAGGTCTCGGCATAG-3' (sense primer) (SEQ ID No.:16)

and

5'-CGCGAATTCAAAAACCCATTCCAGCGATACG-3' (SEQ ID No.:17)

(antisense primer)

or

10 5'-TAAAACCCATTCCAGCGATACG-3' (antisense primer) (SEQ ID No.:18)

for amplifying the hemoglobin receptor protein from *N. gonorrhoeae* MS11A.

Genomic DNA from *N. meningitidis* serotype A or B or *N. gonorrhoeae* species was prepared using standard techniques (see Sambrook, et al., *ibid.*), including enzymatic degradation of bacterial cell walls, protoplast lysis, protease and RNase digestion, extraction with organic solvents such as phenol and/or chloroform, and ethanol precipitation. Crude DNA preparations were also used. An amount (typically, about 0.1 μ g) of genomic DNA was used for each amplification reaction. A PCR amplification reaction consisted of *Pfu* polymerase (Stratagene, LaJolla, CA) and/or *Taq* polymerase (Boehringer Mannheim, Germany) in the appropriate buffer including about 20picomoles of each amplification primer and 200nanomoles of each deoxynucleoside triphosphate. Amplification reactions were performed according to the following scheme:

First cycle 5 min at 95°C

25 2 min at 51°C

6 min at 72°C

Cycles 2-13 45 sec at 95°C

35 sec at 49°C

10 min at 72°C

30

Cycles 14-30 25 sec at 95°C
 35 sec at 47°C
 10 min at 72°C

5 Upon completion of the amplification reaction, DNA fragments were cloned either blunt-ended or, after *Eco*RI digestion, into *Eco*RI digested pSUKS or pWKS30 vectors and transformed into bacteria. Positively-selected clones were then analyzed for the presence of recombinant inserts, which were sequenced as described above in Example 4.

10 As a result of these experiments, three clones encoding the hemoglobin receptor genes from *N. meningitidis* serotypes A and B and *N. gonorrhoeae* MS11A were cloned and the sequence of these genes determined. The nucleic acid sequence for each of these genes are 15 shown in ^{Figures 7A-7I} ^{Figures 8A-8I} ^{Figures 9A-9I} (N. meningitidis, serotype A), (N. meningitidis, serotype A) and (N. gonorrhoeae MS11A).

15 The degree of homology between the cloned hemoglobin receptors from the different *N. meningitidis* serotypes and *N. gonorrhoeae* MS11A was assessed by nucleic acid and amino acid sequence comparison, as described in Example 5 above. The results of these comparisons are 20 shown in ^{Figure 10} and ^{Figure 11A-11D}, respectively. Hemoglobin receptor genes from the three *N. meningitidis* serotypes and *N. gonorrhoeae* MS11A were found to be from 86.5% to 93.4% homologous; the most homologous nucleic acids were *N. meningitidis* serotypes B and C, and the most divergent nucleic acids were *N. meningitidis* serotype B and *N. gonorrhoeae* MS11A (Figure 10 and Table III). Homoglobin receptor proteins from all four *Neisseria* species showed a high degree of homology to the other members of the group, ranging from 87% homology between the hemoglobin receptor proteins from *N. gonorrhoeae* MS11A and *N. meningitidis* serotype B to 93% homology between hemoglobin receptor proteins from *N. meningitidis* 25 serotypes A and B (^{Figure 11D}). In this comparison, all four receptors were found to share 84.7% amino acid sequence identity, and up to 11.6% sequence similarity (i.e., chemically-related amino acid residues at homologous sites within the amino acid sequence). The non-conserved amino acids were found clustered in the regions of the amino acid sequence corresponding to the external loops in the predicted topographical structure of the hemoglobin receptor proteins.

TABLE III

	A	B	C	MS11
A	X	92.2%	93.0%	90.4%
B	93.3%	X	93.4%	86.5%
C	93.2%	93%	X	90.4%
MS11	91.1%	86.8%	91.4%	X

* The numbers in the upper quadrant of the Table (in **boldface**) represent nucleic acid sequence homology between the different hemoglobin receptor genes of the invention, while the numbers in the lower quadrant of the Table represent amino acid sequence homology between the different hemoglobin receptor proteins

It should be understood that the foregoing disclosure emphasizes certain specific embodiments of the invention and that all modifications or alternatives equivalent thereto are within the spirit and scope of the invention as set forth in the appended claims.